# Epistemology

## Preview

### Introduction

Research in organisations can and does address many different problems. However, no matter what the focus of your research is, one principle is common to all: research usually has a clearly stated objective and a most effective method (or set of methods). For instance, as a venue manager you may wish to make a recommendation to expand your audience, so you may decide to survey your members in order to identify and therefore address their particular needs.

It is worth reiterating that although these are both forms of information gathering, each inquiry has a different objective and utilises a different methodology. Both, however, have a clearly defined aim—the gathering and analysing of data—which can be achieved by applying an appropriate method.

Clearly research can become more broad-ranging than the researcher initially expects, at times employing an apparently unrelated discipline for its own purposes. Thus, depending upon whom you talk to about it, research can be seen as a broad-based science, open to creative interpretation, or as an unwieldy mass of contradictory opinions.

This is not surprising, considering that research in business is often concerned with gathering information from people. The source of this data is therefore, by its nature, subjective. Thus there is a legitimate place here for sociology, psychology, and their countless associated disciplines, not to mention the mathematical realms into which the serious researcher must delve in order to make sense of it all.

There is another point to make. No matter how dry they may sound, understanding scientific methodology, deductive and inductive reasoning, and some experience with the psychological methods underlying depth interviewing, also offer another advantage: they can all be useful for personal development because they can help to clarify ideas and solve problems in our everyday lives as well as in our profession.

## What is epistemology?

All research is about knowledge. Epistemology refers knowledge and to the notion that each thesis is expected to make a contribution to knowledge itself. Unfortunately, research is not so easy to define. However, while there is no consensus as to how research should be defined, there are three commonly agreed principles. These are that research is a process of inquiry and investigation, it is systematic and methodical, and it increases knowledge (Hussey & Hussey 1997, p. 1).

These commonly shared principles are formed around the notion that research is not a thing but a process. An example of this view of research is articulated in the research policy of the Victoria and Albert Museum which states:

> Museum research is not, and never has been, a simple or single entity. Rather it is a complex set of different types and styles of research practice, which can be differentiated, but which at the same time are interdependent.
>
> (Saumarez Smith 1993, p. 353)

It is important to consider that researchers use an integrated range of different strategies which are designed to solve particular types of problems. These include issues such as market research into audiences; business research into effective management structures; research into effective communication techniques; and documentary research into contemporary or historical problems.

Research is therefore a way of obtaining information. However, because the purpose of research is to enhance your ability to make more effective judgments, it means that you need to gather data as accurately as possible. To achieve a reasonable level of accuracy you need to be systematic and methodical. This means that when you argue for the acceptance of your proposed solution to a problem, it will be based on a demonstrable logic. Your findings will be reasonable and you will be empowered with new information.

To underline the importance of effective methodology it is worth considering that some researchers highlight the difference between *data* and *information*. Although at times these words are used interchangeably, it is useful to make this distinction. Data is the raw material, things like facts, figures and opinions, while information is the knowledge constructed from those facts and figures, which can then be communicated to others.

It is often said that, unlike data, information is useful. But it should also be clear that without accurate data the conclusions you draw from your research may not lead to an effective solution. In the realm of service industries, for example, bad information, that is derived from inaccurate data, can be especially problematic. Consider the risk associated with decisions involving large-scale venues (such as choosing a football stadium to change the image of the organisation, or courting a new type of audience by using a new look in the advertisements). In these cases there is great potential for making embarrassing and costly mistakes, so basing your strategies on knowledge gained from accurate data will undoubtedly make life less stressful and more successful.

## Pure and applied research

Pure research and applied research are distinguished from each other by their different aims and purposes. In your prescribed text, *pure research* is also called basic research. It is sometimes described as research that is done for the sake of satisfying the researcher's own thirst for knowledge, but in institutions like the Victoria and Albert Museum pure research has a very important role. As the research policy states:

> pure research within the Museum stimulates innovative thinking about the nature and significance of the collections. It feeds into the ways that they are presented and it crosses the boundaries of materials-oriented subject specialisms.
>
> (Saumarez Smith 1993, p. 355)

In this case, pure research, while not directed at solving a particular problem, is nevertheless a core museum activity because it informs and supports other aspects of the museum's work.

Because there are many other ways in which pure research informs the products of any arts organisation, it is considered a fundamental activity. Professional activities like maintaining sector awareness are types of pure research.

*Applied research* has a different purpose or goal and is usually directed at solving a specific problem. This is certainly the more common type of research done and it is perhaps best to think of it as 'solution-oriented' research. In the museum context it would include such areas as audience research, bibliographic research, conservation research and educational research.

# Quantitative and qualitative research

In pursuing the design of your research project you will have to make a decision about the method you will use to collect your data. Central to your ability to make this determination will be a clearly articulated aim supported by an understanding of the notions of quantitative research and qualitative research. Both of these are methods of gathering data and either one, or perhaps both, may serve your objectives. In this section we give a brief introduction to these concepts which will be built on later.

The report *Museum Audiences in Victoria* is a good example of research based on quantitative research. In effect the researchers here simply counted the number of people who visited museums and constructed representative groups based on categories such as age. It enabled them, in the first instance at least, to make this useful statement:

> Research into Victorian arts audiences commissioned by Arts Victoria and the Arts Marketing Taskforce shows that 38% of Victorians aged 14 and over, or 1 388 000 people, visited a museum at least once in the 12 months to February 1997.
>
> (Arts Victoria 1997, p. 1)

Clearly, when it comes to either lobbying politicians or attracting sponsorship, this is the kind of information which helps empower the researcher. In this case, the findings starkly draw attention to the fact that museums matter to over one-third of the Victorian population. Put simply, quantitative research provides the answers to questions such as 'who?', 'where?', 'when?', 'how many?', 'how often?', or 'what kind of?'.

But this research project also had another aim. Arts Victoria also wanted to find out what motivated the audience to visit a museum. It is not just that a visitor walked through the door on a particular day but why they chose to visit on that particular occasion. As you will appreciate, the data to be gathered here is more subjective in nature; it requires asking the subject for their opinion or for data which is personal.

For instance, in the Arts Victoria study, visitors were asked questions such as 'who do you mostly visit with?' and 'who mostly decides what to see?' (Arts Victoria 1997, p. 6). These questions were designed to probe the motivation for gallery visits. For example, one answer to the first question may have conceivably been 'I mostly come with my girlfriend', and the second, 'She does really, she's more into art'.

Therefore qualitative research is more problematic and requires more consideration than quantitative research. Unlike collecting visitor numbers, qualitative research seeks to explore the qualities of the subject's experience. The most effective method of gathering this type of data is the interview, therefore interviewing techniques will be discussed later in this Study Guide.

Note this easy way to decide whether to use quantitative or qualitative research in tackling a research problem. The rule of thumb is to ask yourself: Is it a ‘how much?’ or ‘how many?’ question, or is it a ‘why?’ question?

## Deductive and inductive research

Deductive and inductive research are cornerstones of scientific method. Essentially, they are systematic ways of looking at a problem, and they are both important parts of what is often called scientific investigation. Whereas induction uses previous observations as grounds for stating a general assertion, deduction draws its conclusions through logical argument (inference).

One character renowned the world over for powers of observation and deduction was Sherlock Holmes. He was also extremely modest, saying, as he does in the following reading, that ‘no man lives or has ever lived who has brought the same amount of study and of natural talent to the detection of crime which I have done’!

## References

Arts Victoria 1997, *Fact Sheet 5: Museum Audiences in Victoria,* Arts Research and Marketing Unit, Melbourne.

Saumarez Smith, C. 1993, ‘The practice of research at the Victoria and Albert Museum’, *Museum Management and Curatorship*, vol. 12, pp. 349–59.